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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000282

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2019

TAGS: PREL KDEM FJ

SUBJECT: MELANESIAN SPEARHEAD GROUP LEADERS TO MEET FIJI
STRONGMAN BAINIMARAMA

REF: A. SUVA 279
1B. SUVA 267

Classified By: Ambassador C. Steven McGann for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. Papua New Guinea (PNG) High Commissioner Peter Eafeare warns that the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) meeting planned for July 10 must reaffirm directly to Fiji strongman Bainimarama MSG support for the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) position regarding Fiji. Otherwise, MSG retreat from support of the PIF would likely fracture the PIF while signaling a potentially contentious leaders meeting in Cairns in August. Port Moresby is weighing whether to call for a foreign ministers meeting before Cairns in order to address the issue of Fiji in a way that will prevent it from dominating yet another Forum summit. END SUMMARY.

1. (SBU) During a call on July 6 by Ambassador McGann and DCM Pruett, PNG High Commissioner Peter Eafeare, the dean of Suva's diplomatic corps, discussed preparations for the MSG meeting planned for July 10 in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Vanuatu currently chairs the MSG, which also includes Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands. The MSG members have invited Fiji strongman Frank Bainimarama to explain Fiji's position and to explore the possibility of a common MSG posture regarding Fiji within the PIF.

1. (C) As the sole diplomatic representative of an MSG country resident in Suva, Eafeare said he believes it critically important to the integrity of the MSG that it support the PIF in its dealings with Fiji. He revealed that he is seeking to consult with PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare by telephone to appeal for his personal diplomacy in shaping the Port Vila meeting for a successful outcome. Eafeare felt that Somare should intercede personally with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Dr. Derek Sikua and perhaps Vanuatu Prime Minister Edward Natapei in advance of the meeting, in order to impress upon them the need for a united front in dealing with Bainimarama. Both Sikua and Natapei have shown sympathy for Fiji and a certain degree of naivete, observed Eafeare. Somare, however, has plumbed the depth of his patience in dealing with Bainimarama, having been burned more than once by the dictator after committing his personal prestige to outreach attempts.

¶4. (C) Eafeare argued that whatever their personal misgivings about the PIF's stand on Fiji, the MSG leaders would need to take a stand consistent with the unanimous declaration of the PIF Special Leaders Meeting on Fiji in Port Moresby in January. If not, the Port Vila meeting could open the latent fissure within the PIF on the issue of Fiji, which could lead to Kiribati, Tonga and Tuvalu--and probably Micronesia and the Marshall Islands--joining with the MSG, which would tend to isolate Australia, New Zealand, and Samoa on the issue. Eafeare disclosed that the suggestion had already been vetted of an "MSG-Plus" meeting to include these same countries, but the idea was struck in recognition of its divisive impact on the PIF.

¶5. (C) Eafeare's best case scenario for the Port Vila meeting envisions a united front to Bainimarama that urges him to bring forward elections in Fiji to 2011, vice the September 2014 date Bainimarama declared as part of Fiji's "Roadmap" on July 1 (Ref A). Eafeare agreed that Bainimarama seldom reverses himself publicly, but he noted that if Bainimarama chose, he could convene a new Leaders of Political Parties meeting to include Fiji's opposition parties. Bainimarama could then deem the meeting successful enough to allow the proposed next step, the inauguration of the President's Political Dialogue Forum, to proceed without delay.

¶6. (C) Even this best case scenario would tend to thrust the issue of Fiji to the forefront of the PIF Leaders Meeting agenda, despite the wishes of PIF Chair Australia and other PIF members to shelve the issue of Fiji for now in order to concentrate on other important issues, such as regional

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institutional restructuring and a regional trade agreement. To avoid such an outcome, Eafeare said he intended to suggest to his government that it propose a foreign ministers meeting in advance of Cairns. The meeting would have the sole purpose of reviewing the issue of Fiji after the Port Vila meeting and of dealing with it in such a way as to keep the meeting at Cairns focused on these other issues, even while conceding that the question of Fiji's status will necessarily impact on all of them.

¶7. (C) The MSG meeting in Port Vila is a prelude to a variety of interactions likely to involve Fiji's de facto government in the run-up to Cairns. For example, the Australian High Commission in Suva now informs us that its high commissioner has been given the green light to pursue a meeting with Bainimarama. Although a tactical loosening of its engagement policy, this change in Canberra's approach does not intend to confer any sense of legitimacy on Bainimarama's government. It does recognize, however, that the question of Fiji's political future weighs on the region's ability to fully address other Pacific issues, and it brings Canberra in closer alignment with the steps already taken by the British High Commission and Embassy Suva.

MCGANN